

[Review] Gadomska, A and Szwed, M (2020) The Impact of style on the quality of writing and translation. In Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, B (Ed.), Cultural Conceptualizations in Translation and Language Applications, Second language learning and teaching

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Gadomska, A.,
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In an interconnected world, the movement of goods, services, people, and ideas often depends on translation. The claim of Gadomska and Szwed (2020) is that translation's effectiveness is dependent on universal notions of style.

Gadomska and Szwed's chapter is one of a collection of fourteen that explore the way that culture is conceptualised in translation practice and language education. The first ten chapters in the volume, of which Gadomska and Szwed's chapter is the final one, are devoted to the way that culture is manifest in and by translation, translators and the process of translating; and the remaining four chapters, to which the authors' contribution acts as a bridge, to formal educational concerns and contexts. The readership of the first ten chapters, and Gadomska and Szwed's chapter in particular, can be assumed to be translators, teachers of translation studies, and those more generally interested in cognitive approaches to the study and practice of translation. The authors' thesis is that the tenets of good style, as outlined by Williams (1990) and Williams and Bizup (2015), possess 'intercultural universality' and that their application improves the quality of a writer's original work and that of any translation of it. The authors' understanding of good style may be summed up as 'clarity'.

The chapter comprises three sections. The first outlines and illustrates the authors' notions of clarity and its relationship to style, and presents seven of Williams' (2003) ten principles; it surveys other writers' advice on style; and it applies the same principles and advice to Polish language texts. The second explores ways that a first author's style defines the translator's version of it in spite of, or because of, measures of translation excellence and compliance. The third comprises a short report of an empirical investigation ('The experiment').

The relationship between English and Polish deserves more discussion to explain the apparent ambiguities in the authors' claims. The chapter abstract implies some affinity between the languages: 'Polish scholars point to the same aspects of text clarity as the English language researchers' (Gadomska, & Szwed, 2020. p. 175); and the ten principles could be applied to English, for which they were devised,

and Polish; yet English is ‘analytic’ and Polish ‘synthetic’ (Gadomska, & Szwed, 2020, p. 172); and a figure from Gadomska (2017), surely derived from Kaplan’s work on cultural thought patterns, first published in 1966, graphically illustrates the difference in ‘argumentative writing’ in the two languages (Gadomska, & Szwed, 2020, p. 172). English, whose clarity and economy of expression is represented by a simple downward arrow, implicitly follows Williams’ (2003) principles, which the authors claim to possess ‘intercultural universality’. Next to Polish, however, it appears to be distinctive rather than universal. One explanation is that the authors are not comparing like with like. The worked example (Gadomska, & Szwed, 2020, pp. 170–171) illustrates the fallacy. A speaker of English as a first language comments on the original example from Williams and Bizup (2015) illustrating poor style that ‘No one talks like that!’ (Gadomska, & Szwed, 2020, p. 171) and the authors note that it would be difficult to translate the sentence orally. The same could be said of the improved version. On the other hand, both original and reworked examples would be unremarkable in certain written contexts. And depending on context, the rhetorical structure of written and spoken discourse is capable of seeming like either arrow or meander, regardless of language; but context is mentioned only once in passing (‘Sometimes [the doers of the actions] can be found in the same sentence or in the context’ (Gadomska, & Szwed, 2020, p. 171)), despite its treatment as an eponymous chapter in Williams (1990), a work that is cited throughout.

Gadomska and Szwed have ignored the social variation of style, and the design of texts, spoken and written, for distinct audiences, and beyond that the social relationships involved in language interaction where different notions of clarity may apply. They assume that the author of any text of interest adheres, or aspires, to the formal style conveyed by the original Williams (1990) example and its redraft. English, like Polish and other languages, has as many styles as there

are social situations, and a cline of formality to informality. Clarity and 'concision' (p. 174) are not always the hallmarks of good style, and whether these attributes are recognised and valorised will depend on the reader's purposes and interpretation. That both example sentences are more typical of written than spoken language, and specifically of rather formal written text, is a starting point for noting that the first is actually good style for a formal abstract and the second for a formal letter or similar personal communication. A paraphrase of the principles from Williams (2003) that the authors now list are: nominalise subjects, match them with accompanying transitive verbs, place familiar information first, bring the main verb forward, position complex information at the end, be concise, and avoid more than one level of subordinate clause in a sentence. The principles are simultaneously useful advice for certain contexts and at the same time idealisations that may need more nuanced adoption.

The heading of the second section, the juxtaposed 'Clarity vs translation', suggests that all translation is unclear, an interesting proposition with well-known antecedents regarding the impossibility of reproducing the source text, but the premise is not explicitly acknowledged or explored further. The authors here consider ways that a translation is influenced by the first author's style. The continued focus on author and translator is unnecessarily limiting and, in this part of Gadomska and Szwed's chapter, more attention could have been paid to readers, for readers are themselves active meaning makers, a notion introduced by the reader-response theory of Rosenblatt and Iser more than eighty years ago. Readers have their own experience of the styles of the translator and the source text author.

Gadomska and Szwed have sufficient material that, if expanded, would form the basis of three papers: a position statement, an empirical report, and a review. However, they seem to pursue none of the

possible lines in a coherent or systematic way, so that no single genre is recognisable and no argument is sustained and supported to the extent that it is convincing. The tone is polemical, and various assumptions are made or implied, e.g. by the figure, and by the use of the third person plural pronoun, whose attribution is often unclear. Much of the content is descriptive, consisting of direct quotation or summaries of the authors' or others' work: occasionally it is unclear which. Although the words 'argue' and 'argument' are used liberally, most often they refer to a concept or proposal without supporting evidence. Lack of clarity in the areas referred to results in the overall purpose of the chapter becoming unclear.

The same proposition – that good style means writing simply – is often repeated. Responsibility for the problem of poor translation is laid without substantive evidence at the door of translation teachers. The use of 'we', the choice of source text, the prescriptive message taken from it and the uncritical way that the prescription is presented appear reactionary rather than topical. Presumably, more current perspectives on translation practice exist in journals such as *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*?

The writers' own style can make the content difficult to process. As well as the overuse of distracting quotations, coherence and cohesion within and between paragraphs are often absent, forcing repeated re-reads. In effect, the authors are making the reader do their work for them – mentally unpicking and piecing together the ideas that they proffer but do not develop. For example, what is the logical relationship of the three authors in the following extract?

Joseph Williams is not the only advocate of good style; he is also criticized, for example, by Hinchings (2014) as "superficially pleasing but misguided and restrictive" in his recommendations. However,

Stylistic [problems] belong to those criteria of English text evaluation that leave plenty of room for interpretation and are frequently treated as synonymous to vagueness and awkwardness. It is often observed that when a teacher of English as a foreign language doesn't know how to identify the error, s/he puts the correction symbol ST next to it. Nothing more erroneous... (Gadomska, 2017).

(Gadomska, & Szwed, 2020, p. 173)

Is one possible paraphrase, 'Although Hitchings (2014) criticises the stylistic recommendations of Joseph Williams, one of a number of advocates of good style, Gadomska (2017) approves their potential for countering "vagueness and awkwardness" in English texts (Gadomska, 2017, p.n.)'? Part of the confusion results from the semantic misuse of adverbial conjuncts such as 'not the only' and 'However'; the rest from the unexpected completion of the second sentence with an extended quote, whose content the reader has to paraphrase to construct a contrast with the previous sentence. It is as if a speaker were to don a mask mid-sentence and continue as another character. In addition, in the above and elsewhere, each citation related to a quote requires a page number. Working out the writer's intention in the extract, which is representative of the writing in the larger chapter, considerably slows progress and comprehension.

Of the several strands in the chapter, the most original is the empirical study. If the authors would plan and conduct a replication, confining their claims to cross-cultural (English/Polish), rather than multicultural, conceptualizations in translation, and write it up following the conventional stages of an academic report, viz. an introduction to the area of interest, identification of the problem, presentation of research questions, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion, they would more likely make a valuable contribution to the field of translation

studies. In this way, they could fulfil the promise of the present volume and demonstrate first-hand how style impacts a reader's understanding of written texts and translations.

References

Note: All citations and references are taken from Gadomska and Szwed's chapter as follows:

Gadomska, A. (2017). Using the Interactive Whiteboard Technology for Teaching the Principles of Style during Academic Writing Classes. In D. Gabryś-Barker, & R. Kalamarz, (Eds.), *Języki specjalistyczne. Teoria i praktyka glottodydaktyczna* (pp. 129–139). Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ.

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